



## The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 24  
Issue 3 *September*

Article 4

September 1997

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Haya Itzhaky  
*Bar-Ilan University*

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### Recommended Citation

Itzhaky, Haya (1997) "Successful Adaptation of Immigrants from the former Soviet Union to Project Renewal Neighborhoods: The Influential Factors," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 3 , Article 4.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol24/iss3/4>

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# Successful Adaptation of Immigrants from the former Soviet Union to Project Renewal Neighborhoods: The Influential Factors

HAYA ITZHAKY

Bar-Ilan University

*Migration has been an international phenomenon for centuries. The widespread trend toward migration in recent years has resulted in efforts to examine the factors involved in the adaptation of immigrants to life in the host country. This study examines the factors that effect immigrant adaptation and integration in urban neighborhoods in Israel that are undergoing a process of rehabilitation. Adaptation is defined by the variables: contact with neighbors, participation in community activities, sense of belonging to the community and well-being. These mediator and dependent variables were found to be directly effected by home and host related variables. These variables were not found to directly effect well-being. Proximity of family and ability to converse in Hebrew were found to have an indirect effect on well-being, constructed using community variables, which themselves directly effect well-being. The discussion of the findings refers both to Project Renewal for the Rehabilitation of Neighborhoods, and the role of professional community workers as planners and movers in the neighborhoods incorporated in the project.*

Migration has been an international phenomenon for centuries. In recent years it has become particularly widespread (Valcourt, 1993). In Israel, for example, immigration has increased in the past five years to the point that newcomers now consititute 18% of the country's population. The social changes experienced by immigrants and the process of immigrant adaptation have been studied and documented by researchers in the fields of social work, anthropology, sociology, and psychology. Research findings indicate that successful adaptation depends on quality of preparation for migration, and factors pertaining to the host

community (Beiser, 1988; Briody & Chrisman, 1991; Oh, 1989; Noam, 1992).

The influence of some of these variables on adaptation has been examined with regard to different communities. The purpose of the present study is to investigate the adaptation and integration of immigrants residing in neighborhoods included in Project Renewal for the Rehabilitation of Neighborhoods in Israel. Specifically, the study seeks to identify those home and host related variables pertaining to the management of immigrant absorption by the host community, that will best predict successful adaptation, as measured by contact with neighbors, participation in community activities, and sense of belonging to the community; and how all these variables influence immigrants' well-being. Baker (1989) and Noam (1992), have demonstrated that these variables are among the chief components of immigrant adaptation.

For this study we have designed a model of adaptation, wherein we measure the effect of home and host related variables on local community variables—an influence which was examined in only very few previous studies. The effect of all these variables on well-being will be measured. The attempt to absorb immigrants in the rehabilitated neighborhoods, with the ongoing presence of the community worker, provides both a challenge for research and for the design of a adaptation model that emphasizes community variables.

Project Renewal was a nationwide neighborhood rehabilitation program. The renewal project for each neighborhood consisted of a combination of social and physical rehabilitation programs. The aim was both to strengthen communities and to enhance the quality and improve the prospects in life of their residents (Elazar, 1992). This process was planned and carried out with the help of community social workers. A basic principle of the community workers was the encouragement of meaningful involvement by residents in their immediate social environment. Most of the neighborhoods involved in the project developed a grass-roots leadership that now works together with the community social workers creating an autonomous community infrastructure (Itzhaky & Schwartz, 1995).

Within this framework, community social workers, Local Authorities and neighborhood committees developed various committees in order to meet varying aims. Parent school committees; local health committees; education committees; urban planning committees etc.. The community workers uncovered social problems in the community and encouraged the development of self-help groups and committees for providing responses to these problems. The community workers supervised the residents and provided the means that enabled them to function in the future entirely independently (Itzhaky & Schwartz, 1995). One of the community workers aims was the integration of the new immigrants in these committees and the development of community leaders from their midst.

Many recent immigrants to Israel have taken up residence in Project Renewal neighborhoods because they offer cheap housing and accessible services. The immigrants enhance the socioeconomic profile of the neighborhoods, and their planned integration raises the status of the area (Ginzberg & Zemach, 1992). Moreover despite the low socioeconomic status of such neighborhoods, the residents have expressed their willingness to integrate new populations, whose socioeconomic level is usual higher than that of the host community. We suggest that these circumstances will facilitate immigrant adaptation in such neighborhoods. The present study examines the success of that process and undertakes to identify the predictive factors of successful integration.

### Review of the Literature

Immigrant adaptation has been described in the literature in a variety of ways. The term has been used synonymously with absorption, integration, and adjustment. The measures of the success of adaptation are equally varied.

Denton (1988) defines immigrant adaptation as a reasonable capability of participation in the new society. This should be understood as a multidimensional concept that includes initial adaptation during the period of transition, linguistic adaptation, social adaptation, and cultural adaptation. Social adaptation to the culture of the host country has been studied using sociodemographic

variables as predictors of adjustment, such as duration of stay in the host country, education, command of the language of the host country and home ownership (Beiser, 1988; Nguyen & Henkin, 1982).

Language has been viewed as one of the key factors that determine an immigrant's ability to adapt to the host country. Lack of linguistic proficiency contributes to an immigrant's sense of being socially marginal rather than a full participant in the society (Este, 1988). Briody and Chrisman (1991) have found that language skills are important in speeding the adjustment process. Oh (1989) reveals that pre- and post-immigration education in English significantly influence the overall quality of sociocultural adaptation. Tran and Wright (1986), studying Vietnamese refugees who fled to an English-speaking country, confirm that English-language communication skills have a direct effect on social interaction. According to Padilla et al., (1988), a restricted circle of communication may limit one's social network, however, they did not examine the influence of ability to speak the language of the host country and community variables.

Noam (1992) has investigated 1,250 immigrants from the former Soviet Union living in the town of Lod, which is a Project Renewal area. She notes that new immigrants living in Lod have a sense of belonging to the community, this being expressed by the wish of the majority to remain in the town and their willingness to recommend the town to their friends as a good place to live. Most of the immigrants are nevertheless unaware of the existence of many of the local services, nor do they receive any benefits from them. The social integration of new immigrants is only partial: they experience difficulties in learning the language and in cultivating friendships with veteran Israelis.

It is unclear which are the predictive or influential factors for successful social integration of immigrants. Noam (1992) measured integration in the community through connections with neighbors. Fine (1992) studied social relationships of immigrants and their well-being by examining the backgrounds of the friends whom they visited (new immigrants, established immigrants, native-born Israelis). He found that most contacts of new immigrants were between and amongst themselves, and explained this as a result of linguistic difficulties. As immigrants become

more fluent in the language of the host community, they form significant relationships with settled Israelis. Fine's results also indicate that there is no significant correlation between duration of residence (1–5 years) and existence of social relationships. According to Fine's research, the relationships formed in the neighborhood are influenced by either home ownership or living in rented housing. However he has shown that social relationships are directly and positively effected by immigrants' seniority in the host country.

Recent research shows that immigrants from the former Soviet Union do not mix in Israeli society, but tend rather to confine their relationships to the family unit or a restricted network of friends consisting usually of immigrants with whom they share a common language (Horowitz, 1989; Damian & Rosenbaum, 1991). From this we can deduce that the more frequent the interactions between immigrants and their families, the less likely they are to be actively involved in local activities and to visit Israeli neighbors.

Vega et al. (1991), who researched Mexican refugees emphasize that supportive social contacts positively effect well-being. Bowling, (1990), refers to well-being as a concept that represents adaptation and is influenced by social contacts and other absorption variables.

Additionally, a review of the research reveals that a number of factors influence the adaptation of immigrants to their community and their well-being. Some of these factors are home related—ability to speak Hebrew and proximity to other family members, others are host related—Ulpan (intensive Hebrew course) graduate, home ownership and seniority in the host country. It has been shown that home and host related factors influence other variables connected with adaptation such as well-being, visits to neighbors, community activities and a sense of belonging to the community. We could find no evidence of a theoretical model that related both to adaptation and community factors. In this research we therefore integrated three theoretical models. First, that of Kunz (1976), which describes and defines variables which relate to the refugee's home, and others which relate to the host community; second, Baker's model (1989), which makes the connection between these variables and a sense of belonging to

the community and well-being. The third model, developed by Itzhaky & York (1994) and Itzhaky (1985), grades the community variables and their effect on well-being. This last model relates to all community residents and does not specify immigrants.

In accordance with this framework, the integration between the two models, the present model (shown in Figure 1) defines exogenous variables, home and host related factors, as being Level 1. Level 2 consists of interaction with neighbors (Baker, 1989). The third level consists of participation in community activities. These last two will effect the sense of belonging to the community, defined as Level 4, as proved by Itzhaky (1985) in a non-immigrant community. We have defined Level 5 as immigrants' well-being.

This research will enable us to investigate which of the variables, both home and host related, effect the community factors and well-being, either directly or indirectly.

Figure 1

*Path Diagram of Immigrant Adaptation*

## Method

*The sample:* Ten out of 28 Project Renewal neighborhoods were selected for the sample. The neighborhoods were all located in the country's Central Region. From a list furnished by the Israel Ministry of Absorption, 22 immigrants from the former Soviet Union were randomly selected as subjects in each of the neighborhoods. The research sample thus consisted of 220 such immigrants. The data for the study were collected by trained data collectors who distributed anonymous, self-administered questionnaires, and gathered them when they had been completed. Only 4% of the sample refused to answer the questionnaire. All of the subjects had been living in Israel for a period of at least two years prior to the time of the study. Of the group, 60% were female and 40% were male, ranging in age from 20 to 70; the age range of the majority (85%) was 25–50 years. More than half the subjects were married, and 36% were heads of single-parent families. Over 70% had attended institutions of higher education, with 15 or more years of study; the remainder had received a secondary school education. Most (88%) had attended an intensive Hebrew-language course known in Israel as an *ulpan*, 40% had had attended more than one such course, and 44% had studied Hebrew in Russia. Nevertheless, as many as 40% of the respondents reported that they still experienced difficulties in conversation, and 48% admitted to having difficulties in reading and writing. While only 10% of the subjects were unemployed, most of them indicated that they had accepted employment that was beneath their ability.

The following variables were used in the study:

*Demographic variables:* These included the quality of preparation for immigration, ability to speak Hebrew, proximity to family, as well as factors pertaining to the host community, length of residence in Israel, level of proficiency in Hebrew and home ownership.

*Proximity to family:* This variable was measured using questions designed by Shooval et al. (1974). The questions related to the frequency of family contacts. Responses were scored on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (daily contact) to 4 (no contact). We also examined the proximity of housing arrangements between



the immigrants and their family on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (very near) to 4 (far away). There was found to be a very high correlation between these responses, ( $r=0.58$ ,  $p\ 0.01$ ) and were calculated as the mean of the same variable.

*Level of interaction with neighbors:* This variable was taken from the questionnaire designed by Shooval et al. (1974). The questions related to frequency and content of contacts with neighbors during the preceding month; number of conversations with a neighbor; frequency of entertaining neighbors at home; frequency of visits to neighbors in their homes; borrowing from neighbors or lending to them. Responses were scored on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (every day) to 4 (once a month). We also examined satisfaction from contacts with neighbors on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (very satisfied) to 4 (not at all). Using the reliability test we found Cronbach Alpha 0.84.

*Sense of belonging to the community:* This variable was taken from the research of Itzhaky (1985) and Itzhaky & Ha'Israeli (1995). They defined it in terms of three inter-related components: identification, involvement and loyalty. Identification being pride in their and their children living in the community and pride in the organizations of the community. Involvement is their willingness to invest personal effort as a member of the community and loyalty is their affection for and their attachment to the community and a wish to remain within it as a member. Responses are on a 5 point dimension from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Reliability tests found, as previously, high correlations between the variables. Cronbach's Alpha was 0.85.

*Participation in community activities:* This variable was taken from questionnaires used by Itzhaky and Ha'Israeli (1995) and by Itzhaky and York (1994). The questions related to participation in neighborhood committees; community meetings; community center committees; community center activities. Responses were scored on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (nonparticipation) to 5 (participation in all events). The items were tested for reliability and Cronbach Alpha was .89.

*Well-being:* In this research personal well-being was measured using the questionnaire developed by Bradburn (1969), the Bradburn Affect Balance Scale, a well recognized instrument for measuring well-being. The scale is composed of 10 items connected

with experiences both enjoyable: satisfaction with achievements, happiness, pride, satisfaction, enthusiasm, and non-enjoyable: depression, boredom, loneliness, offense and restlessness, recently felt by the subject. The items on the scale reflect a range of positive and negative questions, the third scale being the difference between them. Reliability test results were received, similar to those noted by Bradburn (1969), for the scale of positive feelings Cronbach Alpha was .70, and for negative feelings, .69. This research also showed a low correlation ( $r = -0.16$ ,  $\alpha < 0.05$ ), strengthening the claim that the two scales are independent. A high correlation was found between the scale of emotional balance (the difference between the positive and negative scales) and both the positive scale,  $r = 0.76$ ,  $\alpha < 0.01$ , and the negative scale,  $r = 0.77$ ,  $\alpha < 0.01$ . An analysis of the emotional balance scale was used given these high correlations.

### Findings

The model described in Figure 1 was tested by using Path Analysis. Most other approaches to testing correlations between variables locate independent variables on a single causal dimension, whereas Path Analysis furnishes additional information about dependent and independent variables by means of indirect routes toward the dependent variable of well-being. This allows us to assess the strength of the direct and indirect effects of each of the independent variables on the dependent variable. Analysis of the data was carried out with the SPSSX and LISREL computer programs.

Preliminary to an examination of the model derived from the findings, consideration should be given to the Pearson correlations ( $r$ ) between the independent and mediating variables (Table 1).

The table of correlations reveals a number of interesting results. The immigrant's ability to speak Hebrew is significantly and positively correlated with his studying in the Ulpan and with his sense of belonging to the community. Proximity to family, years in the host country and home ownership, as opposed to home rental, are significantly correlated with interaction with neighbors. Of these, only proximity to family was found to be negatively corre-

Table 1  
*Pearson Correlation's (r) between exogenous and community variables.*

	Ability to Converse in Hebrew	Physical proximity to family	Years in the host country	Home ownership	Hebrew instruction	Interaction with family	Participation in community activity	Belonging to the Community
1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
2	.01	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
3	.01	-.03	—	—	—	—	—	—
4	.04	.05	.15*	—	—	—	—	—
5	.24**	-.01**	.01	.06	—	—	—	—
6	.08	-.19**	.34**	.26**	.08	—	—	—
7	.11	.12	.10	.31**	.07	.34**	—	—
8	.48**	.26**	.18*	.017*	.01	.26**	.36**	—

lated with interaction with neighbors. Home ownership is significantly and positively correlated with years in the host country and with participation in community activities. The three community variables: interaction with neighbors, participation in community activities and sense of belonging to the community are significantly and positively correlated among themselves.

The path analysis revealed a g.o.f. =.99 correspondence between the results of the model and the intervariable matrix correlation. ( a.g.o.f. =.95,  $p = .695$ ,  $df = 15$ ,  $\chi^2 = 11.79$ , R.M.S.R. =.02). The direct and indirect effects on the dependent variables is represented in Figure 2 by means of Path coefficients which explain the degree of variance.

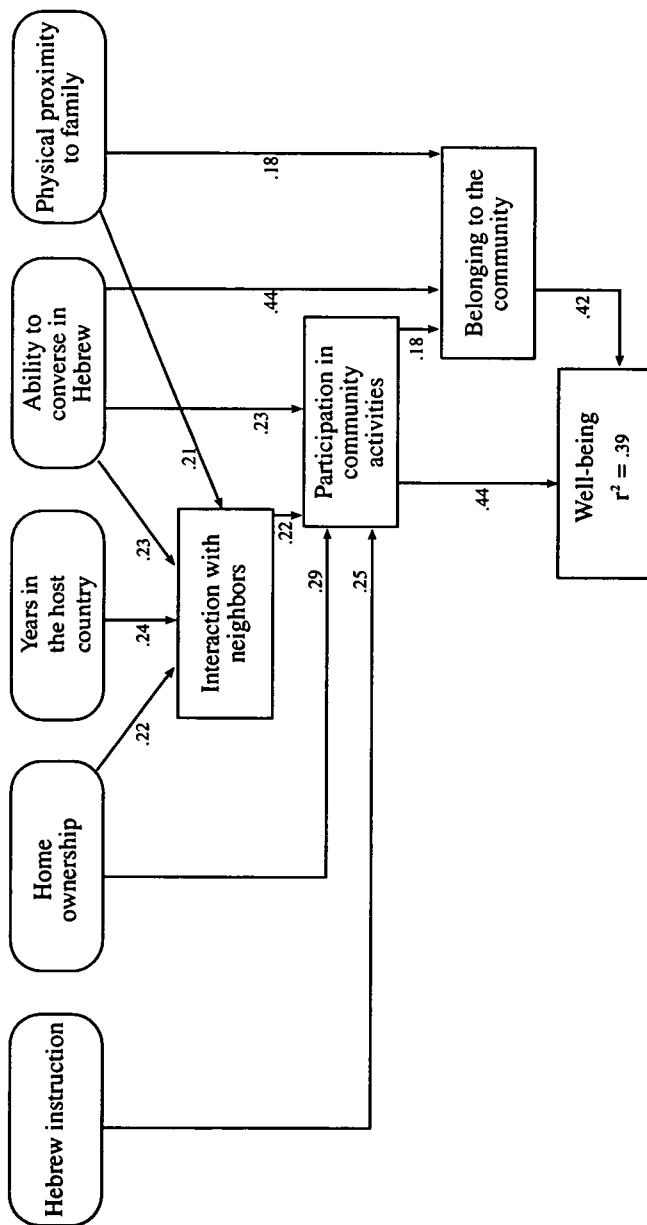
From the model (Figure 2) it is clear that the exogenous and endogenous variables account for 39% of the variance of well-being, and the hypothesized model provides a better fit for the data than alternative models. The exogenous variables only have a direct effect on the community adaptation factors, and not on well-being. The ability to speak the language of the host country is the only one of the exogenous variables to have a direct effect on all three community factors. All the variables, except for learning Hebrew, affect the interactions between neighbors. The ability to speak Hebrew and home ownership have a direct effect on participation in community activities, while the ability to speak Hebrew and proximity to family have a direct effect on the sense of belonging to the community.

This model shows that participation in community activities and sense of belonging to the community are the only variables which directly effect the well-being of immigrants in rehabilitated neighborhoods.

The effects, as revealed by the findings, follows a definite direction: high levels of participation in community activities and a sense of belonging to the community lead to a high level of well-being. The other variables only indirectly influence well-being. These indirect effects of the exogenous variables on well-being are mediated by the community variables. Proximity to family ( $\beta=0.19$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$ ), and ability to converse in Hebrew ( $\beta=0.35$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ) are the most influential of the variables indirectly affecting well-being. It seems that the better their ability to converse in Hebrew and the greater their proximity to family, the greater will

Figure 2

*Path Analysis of Direct and Indirect Effect on Immigrant Adaptation*



be the interaction between the immigrants and their neighbors. This in turn will directly increase their participation in community activities, which deepens their sense of belonging to the community—all of which together will lead to an increasing sense of well-being (see Figure 2).

### Discussion and Implications

The principle aim of this study was to examine successful adaptation of immigrants settled in neighborhoods which are part of a rehabilitation scheme known as Project Renewal. A professional community social worker was employed in these neighborhoods.

Variables identified in previous research in the field were used in this study, in order to differentiate between effects of the home and host related factors, and community factors, on well-being. A causal research model was designed which included community variables some of which had not been examined in the immigrant context. These variables were defined as mediators—being mutually influencing—between the home and host related variables and well-being. Our findings indicate a harmony between the theoretical model and the results.

Previous studies have found that home and host related factors have a direct effect on successful adaptation (Baker, 1989; Vega et al., 1991). This hypothesis was partially substantiated. In this study we have found that home and host related factors have direct effects only on the community adaptation factors and not on well-being.

Apart from learning Hebrew, all other variables influenced the interaction between neighbors. The two variables, ability to speak Hebrew and home ownership, influence participation in community activities. The sense of belonging to the community was influenced by the home related variables, ability to speak Hebrew and proximity to family.

Only the ability to speak the language of the host country has a direct effect on all the three community factors. The other variables effect only one or at most two factors. Our findings therefore confirm those of Beiser (1988), Briody & Chrisman (1991), Este (1988) and Fine (1992) that knowledge of the language is a

key factor in adjustment to the host country. Furthermore, we found knowledge of the language to be vital to the process of adaptation to the community. To initiate contact with Hebrew-speaking neighbors, become engaged in community affairs and feel a deep sense of belonging to that community, immigrants must be able to communicate in the language of the host country, particularly when living in a disadvantaged neighborhood where only Hebrew is spoken. This is corroborated by the finding that simply learning the language only influences participation in community activities. It appears that it is not sufficient to learn the language, it must be known and mastered.

A further interesting result separates the variables, so that the sense of belonging to the community is only effected by those factors connected with the host country. It can be inferred from this that sense of belonging to a community taking part in a rehabilitation scheme, under the auspices of a professional community social worker, is influenced by factors related to the immigrant's previous community. Since these skills, acquired previously during the pre-immigrant phase, enhance feelings of confidence, they, together with the language acquired and even partially mastered and the presence of family serve as a mainstay.

Despite the fact that previous studies have reported that home ownership influences immigrants' decisions to invest in community involvement, developing neighborly relations and in their sense of belonging to the community, (Fine, 1992; Noam, 1992), we found that it only effected the first two community variables, and did not influence the sense of belonging to the community. Possibly the reason is inherent in the fact that the first two variables involve action as does buying a home, while the last, the sense of belonging is a psychological variable. In conclusion, it can be noted that adaptation to the local community is dependent both on attributes that immigrants acquire in their initial home and on others acquired in the host country.

There is a strong and direct influence on well-being from the endogenous variables, the community factors, participation in and a sense of belonging to the community. Certainly this would be indicated by the grading of the community variables. Interaction with neighbors has a positive influence on the level of involvement in community activities. The higher the level of

interactions with neighbors, the more involved the immigrants will be in community activities in their neighborhood, and the more involved they are in community activities, psychologically, they will feel a greater sense of belonging to the community and a deeper sense of well-being.

These findings are compatible with those of other studies, on non-immigrant communities, that showed that active participation in the community influences sense of belonging to the community and well-being (Itzhaky & York, 1994; Itzhaky, 1985). This study adds a further dimension by showing that new immigrants, despite their need for survival and for re-adaptation to the strange country, are similar to the veteran population in their need for investment in community activities in order for successful adaptation to take place.

The following results will testify to the importance of community factors as significant components of successful adaptation.

We did not find that the endogenous variables directly influenced the well-being of the immigrant. This was significantly influenced by the factors associated with the home country, and indirectly by community factors. Hence, immigrants' ability to converse in Hebrew and the proximity of family members will effect their well-being only when they feel involved in the community, and there are frequent interactions with neighbors. In other words, the feeling of confidence, acquired by means of the ability to speak Hebrew and the proximity of family members, this feeling will only influence well-being when there are both interactions with neighbors and participation in community activities. All these activities will have a accumulative effect on the sense of belonging to the community, a psychological community variable, which in itself will influence the sense of well-being, a personal psychological variable.

One can conclude from this that factors associated with adaptation to the local community, within which the immigrant lives, have to be included in the operative definition of adaptation for the immigrant, and psychological variables cannot be the sole criteria.

The importance of the presence and input of the community social workers is emphasized by our findings. As a prime objective for their intervention in and organization of the neighbor-



hood, they develop and nurture the community variables. These include the incorporation of immigrants in the organizational frameworks of the community within the neighborhoods, and the integration, in those frameworks, between the immigrants and the veterans.

The inclusion of immigrants in these frameworks creates a norm of meetings between immigrants and veterans, possibly even of friendships, so that they will take part in the planning and implementation of different projects. Their *de facto* participation in neighborhood activities will positively and definitively influence both their sense of belonging to the community and their feeling of well-being. Our findings therefore emphasize the indispensability of the community social workers.

We therefore recommend the inclusion of professional community social workers in neighborhoods where there is a high concentration of immigrants. Their role will be defined as working with the veteran residents on all matters of community organization, and the incorporation of immigrants within these frameworks and onto all the relevant neighborhood committees. We suggest that the social workers should plan community projects that encourage interaction with neighbors, particularly between the veteran residents and the immigrants.

In addition the community worker has a responsibility to establish frameworks for learning the language. Specifically for those immigrants who have difficulty in conversing in the new language it is worthwhile teaching locally, in the community centers, schools and in places of work where there is a high concentration of new immigrants.

Community social workers should encourage immigrants to discuss their problems and set up self-help groups. These groups will form the basis for community activity, participation in which will create the sense of belonging to the community and will strengthen well-being.

For the future we recommend that the research in this field should be continued, particularly the study of other community variables such as political involvement and participation in voluntary organizations.

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